

AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

Claims 1-10. (*Canceled*)

Claim 11. (*Previously Presented*) A tight lace-up device adapted to equip footwear, the footwear including two portions to be brought closer together with said device, said device comprising:

a tightening zone comprising return elements positioned on said portions;

a linkage including two ends, said linkage connecting, along a predetermined path, at least two return elements arranged on different respective ones of said footwear portions, said linkage forming a loop outside said tightening zone;

a means for locking said linkage;

a gripping device arranged on said linkage in an area of said loop, said gripping device enabling a user to pull efficiently on said linkage with at least one hand, said gripping device comprising a frame for distributing tension of said linkage over a hand of the user.

Claim 12. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 11, wherein said frame is rigid.

Claim 13. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 12, wherein said frame comprises a contact surface complementary of at least three fingers of the hand of the user.

Claim 14. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 11, wherein said gripping device includes a hooking means adapted to cooperate with said two ends of said linkage and thus closing said loop.

Claim 15. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 11, wherein said locking means is integrated into said return elements positioned at a junction of said tightening zone and said loop, for maintaining tension in said tightening zone.

Claim 16. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 11, wherein said tightening zone comprises at least two zones separated by at least one return element positioned on each of said portions of said footwear, and wherein said locking means is integrated into said return elements for maintaining said tightening tension in a lower one of said two zones of said tightening zone, said lower zone being separated from said gripping device by said return elements.

Claim 17. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 16, wherein said return elements, located in said lower tightening zone, include guiding means adapted to prevent said linkage from escaping during loosening.

Claim 18. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 16, wherein said return elements, located in an upper one of said two zones of said tightening zone, are of a hook type for manually positioning said linkage in said return elements.

Claim 19. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 11, wherein said linkage is flexible and substantially non-stretchable.

Claim 20. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 11, wherein said locking means is integrated into a locking element outside said tightening zone, said locking element being slidably mounted on said loop.

Claim 21. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 11, wherein said loop is formed by two portions of said linkage outside said tightening zone, said frame of said gripping device serving to space apart said two portions of said linkage a predeterminate fixed distance during tightening of said linkage.

Claim 22. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 11, wherein said loop is formed by two portions of said linkage outside said tightening zone, said two portions of said linkage being connected to said frame of said gripping device at two spaced-apart locations of said frame.

Claim 23. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 11, wherein said tightening zone consists of a lower tightening zone comprising return elements on a lower portion of the footwear and an upper tightening zone comprising return elements on an upper portion of the footwear, said means for locking said linkage being integrated in said return elements of said lower tightening zone for maintaining a tightening tension in said lower tightening zone.

Claim 24. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 11, wherein said locking means comprises a locking structure contained within each of at least said two return elements, said locking means further comprising a locking element slidably mounted on said loop, said locking element being separate of said locking structure contained within said two return elements.

Claim 25. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 13, wherein said contact surface comprises at least three successively arranged cavities, each of said three cavities corresponding to a respective one of three fingers of the hand of the user.

Claim 26. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 16, wherein said means for locking said linkage comprises means for maintaining said tension in said lower one of said two tightening zones independent of, and different from, a tension in an upper one of said two tightening zones.

Claim 27. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device adapted to equip footwear, the footwear including two portions to be brought closer together with said device, said device comprising:

a tightening zone comprising return elements positioned on said portions;

a linkage including two ends, said linkage connecting, along a predetermined path, at least two return elements arranged on different respective ones of said footwear portions for applying a tightening tension on said linkage in said tightening zone, said linkage being slidable with respect to said return elements;

a linkage tension maintaining structure to maintain said tightening tension on said linkage in said tightening zone;

said linkage comprising two linkage portions forming a loop outside said tightening zone;

a gripping device arranged on said linkage in an area of said loop, said gripping device comprising a frame serving to space apart said two portions of said linkage to allow fingers of a hand of a user to extend within said loop, to engage said frame, and to pull on said linkage with said hand.

Claim 28. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 27, wherein said linkage tension maintaining structure is integrated within said return elements positioned at a junction of said tightening zone and said loop.

Claim 29. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 27, wherein said linkage tension maintaining structure comprises a locking structure contained within each of at least said two return elements, said linkage tension maintaining structure further comprising a locking element slidably mounted on said loop.

Claim 30. (*Currently Amended*) A lace-up device according to claim 27, wherein said tightening zone comprises at least two zones separated by at least one return element positioned on each of respective ones of said portions of said footwear lower than an uppermost return ~~element~~ elements in said tightening zone, and wherein said locking means comprises means for maintaining a tension in a first of said two tightening zones independent of a tension in a second of said two tightening zones.

Claim 31. (*Previously Presented*) An article of footwear comprising:

an upper comprising two portions to be brought closer together to tighten the article of footwear upon a foot;

a lace-up device comprising:

a tightening zone comprising at least two return elements positioned on respective ones of said portions of said upper;

a linkage including two ends, said linkage connecting, along a predetermined path, at least said two return elements for applying a tightening tension on said linkage in said tightening zone, said linkage being slidable with respect to said two return elements;

a linkage tension maintaining structure to maintain said tightening tension on said linkage in said tightening zone;

said linkage comprising two linkage portions forming a loop outside said tightening zone;

a gripping device arranged on said linkage in an area of said loop, said gripping device comprising a frame serving to space apart said two portions of said linkage to allow fingers of a hand of a user to extend within said loop, to engage said frame, and to pull on said linkage with said hand.

Claim 32. *(Previously Presented)* An article of footwear according to claim 31, wherein said linkage tension maintaining structure is integrated within said return elements positioned at a junction of said tightening zone and said loop.

Claim 33. *(Previously Presented)* An article of footwear according to claim 31, wherein said linkage tension maintaining structure comprises a locking structure contained within each of at least said two return elements, said linkage tension maintaining structure further comprising a locking element slidably mounted on said loop, said locking element being separate of said locking structure contained within said two return elements.

Claim 34. *(Previously Presented)* An article of footwear according to claim 31, wherein said upper is a high upper, said high upper including a lower portion extending to an area of an ankle of a foot and an upper portion extending above the lower portion.

Claim 35. (*Previously Presented*) An article of footwear according to claim 34, wherein said tightening zone comprises a lower zone for tightening said lower portion of said upper and an upper zone for tightening said upper portion of said upper, said lower and upper zones being separated by at least one return element positioned on each of respective ones of said portions of said upper.

Claim 36. (*Previously Presented*) An article of footwear according to claim 35, wherein said linkage tension maintaining structure comprises means for maintaining a tension in said lower tightening zone independent of and different from a tension in said upper tightening zone.

Claim 37. (*Previously Presented*) An article of footwear according to claim 36, wherein said linkage comprises one and only one lacing extending through said lower and upper tightening zones.

Claim 38. (*Previously Presented*) An article of footwear according to claim 36, wherein said linkage is continuous from a bottom of said lower tightening zone to a top of said upper tightening zone.

Claim 39. (*Previously Presented*) An article of footwear according to claim 36, wherein said lower tightening zone extends from a metatarsophalangeal articulation area to an ankle area.

Claim 40. (*Previously Presented*) An article of footwear according to claim 31, wherein said tightening zone comprises at least two zones separated by at least one return element positioned on each of respective ones of said portions of said upper, and wherein said linkage tension maintaining structure comprises means for maintaining a tension in a first of said two tightening zones independent of a tension in a second of said two tightening zones.

Claim 41. (*Previously Presented*) An article of footwear according to claim 31, wherein said frame of said gripping device is rigid.

Claim 42. (*Previously Presented*) An article of footwear according to claim 11, wherein said frame of said gripping device is rigid.

Claim 43. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 42, wherein said fixed distance is less than a width of a hand of the user.

Claim 44. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 42, wherein said frame comprises a contact surface complementary of no greater than three fingers of the hand of the user.

Claim 45. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 27, wherein said frame of said gripping device is rigid.

Claim 46. (*Previously Presented*) A lace-up device according to claim 27, wherein said frame serves to space apart said two portions of said linkage a fixed distance during tensioning of said linkage.

Claim 47. (*Previously Presented*) An article of footwear according to claim 31, wherein said frame serves to space apart said two portions of said linkage a fixed predeterminate distance during tensioning of said linkage.

Claim 48. (*Previously Presented*) An article of footwear according to claim 31, wherein said linkage is connected to said gripping device during use of said article of footwear.

Claim 49. (*New*) A sports boot comprising:

an upper comprising two portions to be brought closer together to tighten the article of footwear upon a foot;

a lace-up device comprising:

a tightening zone comprising at least two return elements positioned on respective ones of said portions of said upper;

a lace including two ends, said lace connecting, along a predetermined path, at least two return elements for applying a tightening tension on said lace in said tightening zone, said lace being slidable with respect to said two return elements;

a lace tension maintaining structure to maintain said tightening tension on said lace in said tightening zone;

said lace comprising two lace portions extending from said tightening zone;

a gripping device connected to both of said two lace portions, said two lace portions and said gripping device constituting a loop extending away from said upper;

said gripping device having a non-uniform cross section along a length extending between said two lace portions;

said gripping device spacing apart said two lace portions to allow fingers of a hand of a user to extend within said loop, grip said gripping device, and apply a tensioning force to said lace.

Claim 50. (*New*) A sports boot according to claim 49, wherein said gripping device is rigid.

Claim 51. (*New*) A sports boot according to claim 49, wherein said gripping device serves to space apart said two lace portions a fixed predeterminate distance during tensioning of said lace.

Claim 52. (*New*) A sports boot according to claim 49, wherein said gripping device has a maximum cross section along said length multiple times a transverse cross section of said lace.

Claim 53. (*New*) A sports boot according to claim 49, wherein said lace is connected to said gripping device during use of said boot.

Claim 54. (*New*) A tight lace-up device adapted to equip footwear, the footwear including two portions to be brought closer together with said device, said device comprising:

a tightening zone comprising return elements positioned on said portions;

a linkage including two ends, said linkage connecting, along a predetermined path, at least two return elements arranged on different respective ones of said footwear portions, said linkage forming a loop outside said tightening zone;

a means for locking said linkage;

a gripping device arranged on said linkage, said gripping device enabling a user to pull efficiently on said linkage with at least one hand, said gripping device comprising a frame for distributing tension of said linkage over a hand of the user.

Claim 55. (*New*) A tight lace-up device adapted to equip footwear, the footwear including two portions to be brought closer together with said device, said device comprising:

a tightening zone comprising return elements positioned on said portions;

a linkage including two ends, said linkage connecting, along a predetermined path, at least two return elements arranged on different respective ones of said footwear portions, said linkage forming a loop outside said tightening zone;

a means for locking said linkage;

a gripping device arranged on said linkage, said gripping device enabling a user to pull efficiently on said linkage with at least one hand, said gripping device comprising a rigid frame for distributing tension of said linkage over a hand of the user.

Claim 56. (*New*) A tight lace-up device adapted to equip footwear, the footwear including two portions to be brought closer together with said device, said device comprising:

a tightening zone comprising return elements positioned on said portions, said tightening zone further comprising at least two zones separated by at least one return element positioned on each of said portions of said footwear;

a linkage including two ends, said linkage connecting, along a predetermined path, at least two return elements arranged on different respective ones of said footwear portions, said linkage forming a loop outside said tightening zone;

a means for locking said linkage, said locking means being integrated into said return elements for maintaining said tightening tension in a lower one of said two zones of said tightening zone, said lower zone being separated from said gripping device by said return elements;

a gripping device arranged on said linkage, said gripping device enabling a user to pull efficiently on said linkage with at least one hand, said gripping device comprising a frame for distributing tension of said linkage over a hand of the user.